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PROGRAM Special Assignment

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SUBJECT Mercenaries In Suriname

TED CAVANAUGH: American mercenaries are training guerrillas to invade Suriname.

"Special Assignment" correspondent Chuck de Caro has this exclusive report.

"DR. JOHN": Keep your head down.

[Sound of rifle fire].

CHUCK de CARO: These men are Surinamese citizens, resistance fighters determined to liberate their country. They are being trained in French Guiana by American soldiers of fortune.

In this exclusive CNN report, the two American mercenaries known as "Dr. John" and "Boss" told us about their efforts.

"DR. JOHN": I was retained by the Council for the Liberation of Suriname last year to prepare the military options that would enable the Council to regain their country from the dictator, Bouterse. We're down here now training this cadre who will then turn and train more of their people, and hopefully will be launching an offensive against the dictator in the not-too-distant future.

de CARO: This is the country the resistance fighter plan to attack, Suriname, a former Dutch colony on the northeast coast of South America.

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After 300 years of Dutch rule, Suriname became independent in 1975. However, this man, Sergeant Major Desire Bouterse, overthrew the legitimate government of Suriname in 1980 and, as dictator, promoted himself to Lieutenant Colonel. A Marxist, Bouterse has progressively tightened his country over Suriname.

Though CNN was granted special permission to film in Suriname, our repeated requests to talk to Colonel Bouterse about the economic and political situation was repeatedly denied.

Bouterse claims that there have been four coup attempts against him since 1980, and all have been put down.

In December of '82, Bouterse had 15 prominent members of the opposition rounded up and executed. He says they were shot trying to escape. Bouterse then rescinded freedom of the press and set up N.V.D., the government controlled media.

As a result, the Dutch cutoff \$1.5 billion in aid. Then the United States stopped one-and-a-half billion dollars in technical assistance, leaving Bouterse's single product economy in shambles.

Suriname's economy is almost totally based on the aluminum industry. And as world prices for aluminum vary, so does Suriname's finances.

Desperate for funds, Bouterse squeezed the aluminum industry, but the additional levies cut profits already marginal because of the low worldwide aluminum prices. As a result, Sir Alcoa, the country's largest producer, shutdown its bauxite mine and may eventually shutdown all operations.

In January, a strike by aluminum workers caused the appointed government to collapse. Bouterse got a settlement, but was forced to liberalize the new government and promise the return of some freedoms by May.

Without assistance from Holland or the United States, Suriname will run out of money in about 18 months. To get assistance, Bouterse must return Suriname to a more democratic system. However, at this moment, Bouterse keeps the country locked down tight.

This reporter and cameraman, Ken Kelch, had to keep a low profile about our intentions as we were repeatedly searched at roadblocks. Rather than be searched again with politically sensitive video tapes, we had to travel by canoe across the mile-wide piranha-infested Maroni River into French Guiana.

As a result of Colonel Bouterse's repressive regime, many thousands of Surinamese left the country. Many of them fled either to French Guiana, or they have formed resistance movements.

CNN made contact with one group, the Liberation Council of Suriname, and was granted permission to film its American mercenaries training the resistance fighters at a secret camp inside French Guiana.

The leader of the resistance fighters is Lieutenant Roy Bottse, a former lieutenant in the Surinamese Army.

LIEUTENANT ROY BOTTSE: We intend to take the country back by hard military actions.

We are here with a number of men, fairly well selected, hard trained, and we will hit hard, especially in places where we know that the enemy is established.

de CARO: The resistance fighters undergo rugged training. The American soldiers of fortune use live ammunition to lend deadly realism.

How do you feel about having to go on against forces that are many times greater?

"BOSS": They're greater in numbers. They have more equipment than us. I believe a good majority of them will run when faced with a disciplined, small unit.

de CARO: Tell us about your military experiences.

"DR. JOHN": I'm veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division, also the United States Marine Corps.

"BOSS": Unconventional warfare, Republic of Vietnam, and it lends itself for me training these people to do what I experienced those years ago.

de CARO: Are you working for the CIA?

"BOSS": No, I'm not.

de CARO: John, how about you? Are you working for the Central Intelligence Agency?

"DR. JOHN": No, I'm not, Chuck. I clear every operation with the United States Government. I do not work for the United States Government, but I never work against it.

de CARO: It's sort of a courtesy move on your part?

"DR. JOHN": Exactly.

de CARO: One final question. What happens if you fail? What happens if you're caught by Bouterse and his forces.

"DR. JOHN": I don't plan to live forever, Chuck.

de CARO: How about you?

"BOSS": That would be an occupational hazard which we accept.

de CARO: The American mercenaries have trained the guerrillas in a number of skills, ranging from the maintenance and care of their American-made AR-15 and Mini-14 rifles to effective use of camouflage in the jungle.

During tactical training, half the guerrillas set up an ambush. The others on patrol are taught to disperse quickly when attacked and counter-attack from behind. Again, the American mercenaries use live ammunition to add realism and to harden their troops. Minor wounds from such training are not uncommon. Marksmanship training is stressed, one round, one hit.

French authorities allow the resistance fighter to train, but watch them closely.

Here, two gendarmes conduct a surprise inspection, detaining this reporter and cameraman Ken Kelch to check passports. They were not aware that our video camera was rolling.

The guerrillas say that the French look the other way for one reason, Aryan, the missile launched from French Guiana is a multi-billion dollar gamble by France and other European nations to tap the booming commercial space market. Having a Cuban-backed Marxist regime next door to export a revolution is not in the French interests.

The French did warn that the political situation was shaky, and that once the guerrillas struck targets in Suriname they could not return.

The day after CNN was detained by the gendarmes, the French, apparently worried about an international incident, deported the resistance fighters to a Dutch island. One of the American mercenaries has told CNN that the resistance fighters will simply regroup and attack Suriname soon.

The stage is now set for a counter-revolution in Suriname. How well this handful of freedom fighters can do against Colonel Bouterse's forces, many times their strength, now depends on their courage, skill and luck.

From the jungles of French Guiana, this is Chuck de Caro, CNN "Special Assignments."